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NEASC Undergraduate Experience: Subcommittee Report on Advising December 2002

Goals

Academic advising plays a central role in the undergraduate experience. Done well, it integrates students' course work with the larger mission of the University and prepares them for life beyond college. It establishes enduring relationships. Done poorly, it slows progress to degree and leaves students unaided to find coherence in their college education.

Ideally, academic advising:

- Engages students;
- Builds student-advisor collaborations;
- Helps students fulfill major program and University requirements;
- Assures graduation in a timely fashion;
- Stimulates exploration outside of the students' major disciplines;
- Encourages intellectual connections across disciplines;
- Integrates in and out of classroom experiences;
- Helps set goals and strategies to achieve them during and after college; and
- Prepares students for graduate study and/or employment.

Expectations

Every undergraduate at the University of New Hampshire has an assigned academic advisor with whom they meet at least once each semester to review academic progress and approve course selections prior to registration for the subsequent semester.

The University expects that advisors are

- Available to meet with students throughout the semester;
- Knowledgeable about University requirements, major requirements, and other campus resources;
- Able to motivate students about the reasons and importance of these requirements and more generally, a liberal arts education; and
- Interested in students' welfare beyond their classes.

It expects that students

- Seek out their advisors;
- Come to advising meetings having reviewed their academic progress to date and at registration, time course options;
- Monitor their fulfillment of University and major program requirements;
- Explore and engage intellectually across academic areas, including outside their declared majors;
- Meet deadlines;
- Use campus resources and follow-up on referrals; and
- Check their campus mail boxes and e-mail accounts.

Current State

Advisors' and Students' Views of Advising

We know that these goals and expectations are realized for some students and their advisors here. We also know that for many others, we fall short. Students often have difficulty finding their faculty advisors. When they do, they may receive a hurried signature without advice. The default advisor sometimes is the departmental administrative assistant. New students frequently express confusion about who their advisor is or if they even have one. Common also are complaints about advisors who do not know University requirements (general education and writing), minors, and University procedures. Some students follow the path of least resistance by using their friends in the advising capacity often to the detriment of the student advised.

Most faculty advisors report demanding schedules that leave scarce time for advising -- an activity that carries little formal recognition in the promotion and tenure process. Faculty typically believe that advising is part of "job". They cite "personal satisfaction" as the only reward for good advising. There are seemingly no consequences for poor or indifferent advising though over time students are diverted from those advisors. The students may also seek a different major.

Many faculty advisors enjoy working with upper level students where they play more the role of mentors in the disciplines. Particularly in the smaller departments, faculty highlight advising as an opportunity to get to know their students well. Some report that their advisees eventually become their professional colleagues, adding to the value of the advising experience.

Less satisfying is advising on University requirements. Some faculty advisors indicate continuing confusion over the University Writing requirement. Many faculty are unaware of the advising resources available through the University's student information system. Those aware of the online system find it not user friendly. Most have never received a copy of the Faculty Advising Handbook – revised each year by the University Advising and Career Center and distributed to all new faculty -- and do not know that it is available online.

Also challenging is advising students confused about their academic paths, particularly those in their first year. That advising is often cited as being focused on helping students meet requirements (answering the, “What course should I take?” question) rather than exploring a discipline. Many first year students – those declared and undeclared -- find faculty intimidating and University life overwhelming. Seeking help and knowing how to ask questions represents a challenge for these students.

Most undeclared advising is handled by staff in the University Advising and Career Center or the deans' offices. These advisors see a particularly high volume of students during the relatively brief windows before students may actually register for classes online. These meetings of necessity are short. Unless students take advantage of their advisors earlier in the semester neither they nor the advisors find these meetings very satisfying.

Another advising issue centers on the General Education program. Many advisors and students experience it as a series of requirements to be met rather than as a tool for exploration and development of critical thinking and quantitative analytical skills. These views suggest that the program needs intentional linkages among courses across categories to stimulate integrative thinking. Absent that, the program becomes simply a hurdle to overcome as students move toward their degrees.

Some faculty also view departmental and program requirements as limiting student exploration outside the major. Several programs leave no room for electives students' first semesters, and many leave only one slot open. That is usually left for a general education course so that students are able to progress toward that requirement. These rigidities pit the goals of a liberal arts education against the needs of a discipline to assure the competence of its graduates.

Most advisors and students see the benefits of the University's real-time, on-line registration system. Further, advisors continue to support advisor sign off on student schedules each semester. Many advisors, however, see the system as driving the experience. Student advisor meetings are compressed into a brief period of time. Having gotten advisor approval for a schedule in the form of an access code, students then may register online for a completely different suite of courses. Because student registration times are generated randomly for each year class, there is little incentive for students to prepare early. The last minute mentality is reinforced when students discover that seats in high demand courses often come available at the end of the registration process. Given the demand on advisor time, the experience falls short of the ideal.

Many advisors view students as lacking motivation to take responsibility for understanding requirements and meeting deadlines. These behaviors often underlie student complaints about advising. The inability to get the classes they want or the majors they wish is often traced to students' failure to follow their advisors' recommendations, meet University deadlines and/or attain the grade point average to qualify for a program.

Advising Responsibility

Each of colleges and schools approaches advising somewhat differently and within those units, departments may allocate the advising load differently, too. All students with declared majors are advised by faculty with two exceptions. First year English and Psychology (provisional) majors are advised by University Advising and Career Center staff and upper-class Whittemore School students are advised by that school's Undergraduate Programs staff.

Undeclared students in each college/school are advised by the associate dean and staff with three exceptions. Those assigned to the College of Liberal Arts are advised by University Advising and Career Center staff.

Approximately 40% of the students, who enter as Liberal Arts undeclared, eventually declare majors outside of that College; approximately 10% of the students advised in the Center came from the other colleges/schools. These staff advisors, therefore, must be knowledgeable about programs and requirements across the University curriculum. All first year Whittemore School students are advised by upper-class WSBE students under the supervision of the Whittemore School's Undergraduate Programs office.

Undeclared students in the Thompson School are advised by the associate director.

Departmental decisions about who advises which and how many students are typically made by the department chair. All departments have an undergraduate program coordinator -- sometimes the department chair and sometimes another faculty member -- who serves as the initial contact for students seeking to declare that major. The chair or undergraduate coordinator is often assisted by a department staff member. In the larger departments, an undergraduate program coordinator may handle all advising responsibilities. In a few departments, one faculty member advises all undergraduates. In others, students select their advisors based on their academic interest or students are assigned to a faculty member based on interest. A few departments assign a faculty member to each entering class. That person then advises students through to graduation.

Equally variable is the percentage of students each faculty member might advise. Some chairs and undergraduate coordinators try to divide up advisees equally. A few faculty members may end up carrying the entire advising load in some departments, particularly those where students opt for an advisor based on interest. Most departments have the expectation that all faculty advise students; however, as faculty members go on leave and student interests change, the allocation shifts.

Preparing Advisors

Departments vary in the preparation and guidance they provide faculty advisors. A few have handbooks; some refer their faculty to the Faculty Advising Handbook or the University Advising and Career Center. The orientation for new faculty covers the topic briefly; some of the colleges/schools address advising as part of their programs for new faculty. Most new faculty, however, learn advising from doing it. Staff advisors belong to the University-wide Professional Advising Network, which serves to keep that group up-to-date. That organization hosts a list serve, Advise.Net. All professional advisors and undergraduate coordinators are subscribed to this list, where changes in requirements and procedures as well as deadlines are announced.

Steps to Improve Academic Advising

While it is easy to find fault with our current approach to academic advising, it is important to note that based on undergraduate retention rates and time to

degree, the University compares favorably with its peers. Many faculty and professional staff advisors work closely with their advisees, and many students seek and follow the guidance provided by their advisors. Undeclared students -- perhaps the most challenging population -- commonly express satisfaction with their advising experience, citing both the availability of their advisors and their knowledge.

Yet, there is room for improvement and that improvement will only come if there are tangible incentives assigned to good advising and the system itself is simplified.

*** Incentives for Improving Academic Advising**

- Provide stipends or release time for faculty who want to advise students. Link the stipend or release time to participation in regular University-wide workshops on advising and to student evaluation of the advising experience;
- Require that anyone who advises undergraduates has a comprehensive understanding of University requirements and University resources;
- Make advising on University requirements easier
 - Train on available technology such as degree audits and
 - Make technology more user friendly;
- Avoid using faculty advisors during their first year at the University;
- Allow junior faculty sufficient time to gain knowledge of the University before they assume advising responsibilities;
- Do not use part time instructors, adjuncts, or faculty in residence as advisors unless they have comprehensive knowledge of University requirements; and
- Have advisors participate in an advising workshop covering University requirements, academic policies, and campus resources and advising technology before taking on advisees.

*** Incentives for students to seek contact with their advisors**

- Make sure that advisors post adequate hours for advising;
- Make sure faculty are in their offices for that advising;
- Make sure that faculty assist students with University as well as major requirements;
- Assign every first year student an advisor prior to matriculation and indicate the advisor name for every first year student in their Webcat account;

- Have registration access codes (RACS) correspond to when students meet with advisor, allowing students who prepare to get best class access; and
- Simplify steps students need to take to change majors/declare a major:
 - Have student records easily available online so that advisors may review records and then give on line approval and
 - Do not allow a student to leave major until they have approval to declare a new major.

*** Other Steps to Improve Academic Advising**

- Explore the role that major program requirements play in discouraging students from exploring diverse academic areas;
- Revise the general education program:
 - Assure that each first year student is in a class the first semester with 25 or fewer students
 - Develop for strategies to help students to see their general education courses as part of a cohesive academic experience and not as a set of requirements to be met
 - Revamp the categories along the lines recommended in the Discovery report, and
 - Make sure there are ample seats in category 3, particularly at the 400 level;
- Evaluate academic advising -- University-wide and departmental -- on a regular basis and incorporate findings in regular departmental reviews;
- Encourage departmental exit interviews for students who leave the major and for those who graduate;
- Provide adequate staff to advise undeclared first year students;
- Enforce the rule that by 64 credits student have declared a major -- in response to growing number of juniors who are undeclared; and
- Make first semester progress reports meaningful:
 - Distribute them early in the semester
 - Make sure they are completed for key first year courses, and
 - Make sure advisors follow-up with students showing deficiencies.

Data for this report came from the following sources: Chairs survey on advising assignments, load, rewards/incentives, strengths and weaknesses; survey of professional advisors; discussions with associate deans; student focus groups; and review of past reviews of University advising. 01/08/03